

2006

On being there

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ON BEING THERE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Donald Lawrence Simmons
B.F.A., Maryland Institute College of Art, 2002
August 2006

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ABSTRACT

ON BEING THERE is the physical embodiment of an emotional experience. The works are responses to stories told and memories of my two grandfathers, being made of images from their possessions and sketchbooks. The object was to explore the experience of loss and to create a record of that experience. The work is an investigation of the self through the history of my grandfathers' lives and experiences told in the media of printmaking.

ON BEING THERE

The body of work I have created is a physical manifestation of an emotional experience. The work as a whole is a means for me to digest this emotion and transform it into something tangible. I work through the printmaking process to develop a body of work that makes sense of emotional experience. My thesis consists of approximately 25 mixed media prints ranging from 18" x 24" to 24" x 36" and larger. The work produced for this show is made up of layers of imagery and metaphors that are clear to me as far as their content and references are concerned. The imagery is intensely personal, being made of images collected from my grandfathers' possessions and sketchbooks. It holds an aesthetic value as well as a familiar or intrinsic value in that these discovered images directly relate to my life or relationship with my grandfathers. These icons and personal allusions perform two functions. One is to create an emotional or personal connection to a story or event either experienced by me or told to me in the form of a story or tale by my grandfathers. The other is a purely formal visual function. Since I cannot directly relate the whole of my experience and the relationships that I had with my grandfathers, I am attempting to create an environment in which my intent and emotional experience are presented to the viewer and alluded to as a common human experience.

My connections and experiences with my grandfathers are two very different ones, but they do have common characteristics, and I was able to see and explore these characteristics and relationships through the creation of this body of work. A web of different moments exists with people whose personalities, histories, and lives are tied to my identity. My mother's father was a graphic artist and portrait

painter, who grew up in northern Mississippi, was a sharecropper, and picked cotton in his youth. He and his twin brother attended Ringling School for the Arts in the nineteen forties. When I was a small child, he would take me to the museum to see paintings and sculptures. He had all of the Uncle Remus and Aesop's tales memorized and would on occasion recite the stories as well as an array of epic and humorous poems.

My father's father had a similar upbringing as a farmer or sharecropper who grew up in Fairforest, South Carolina. He also picked cotton in his youth, but he was shipped off on the U.S.S. Augustus to fight in World War II. Upon his return he opened a scrap yard and eventually built a textile machinery company, around which the majority of my memories about him center. He was a workaholic and remained so until his health would not let him continue.

At a young age I spent a lot of time in the machine shop and scrap yards, and now I realize the impact that those surroundings and experiences had on my psyche. When I handle or see the textile parts they immediately stir a plethora of memories that tie directly to my grandfather and his life. The machine casting parts and textile imagery are a deeply engrained portion of my past experience, yet they carry their own rich and widely varied associations and meanings both socially and culturally. In order to separate them from a social/political context that is not directly related to my content, I choose to distort or partly obscure the machinery or mill imagery. I use these images on a basic visual level as forms I can manipulate on a pictorial/compositional basis. In addition this imagery serves as an agenda for the ideas of work and the past. The distortion of the imagery is a vehicle to reference its presence in my memories without the social

implications. This distancing is why I have chosen to install casting molds in and around the work. They will function as a way to create a personal context or physical presence in an environment that I am unable to create in any other way. The molds are one step removed from the actual machinery parts and thus unfamiliar, which correlates to my memory of the imagery being at one point out of scale and unfamiliar to me as a child. I hope to create an exploratory visual experience for the viewer, a moment in my memory. The process of making the prints and castings was a way for me to connect to the past through personal experience, to create a body of work through which I connected to my grandfathers' realities and which on some level allowed me to see through their eyes. I was able to reconnect with the objects and experiences of my youth and reinvent/investigate my relationship to my parents' fathers.

The actual act of creating these prints helped me to work through many lingering emotions I have regarding the loss of my grandfathers as well as giving me the opportunity to physicalize those emotions to share with the world. I am able to explore my world through printmaking because of its relationship to my everyday life. Through the photo print processes I have the ability to mimic or recreate the ideas, idioms, or objects using image juxtapositions. I explore the surroundings and commonly held associations then redefine and reorganize the viewer's and my own reality through the medium of print. As such, my personal narrative gives way to reveal a cascade of subjective interpersonal vignettes that invite an associative reading. The work is not as much of a personal narrative as it is an installation.

The majority of the imagery in this work comes from before I was born.

This allows the images to represent my personal connections to my past, and to reference an aesthetic of a bygone era. My intent is to evoke my grandfathers' times, life references, and experiences. These images are allusions to experiences and individuals, which have impacted me over the years. The images of my grandfathers are powerful and extremely emotional ones that I am exploring as a result of their passing in the last two years. These works all have an underlying theme other than their relationship to the show. They are in one form or another a reflection on the domestic or private worlds in which we as humans live.

These works are familiar to us and so carry the memories and baggage that we associate with them as a society or as individuals. These images and objects are familiar, intimate and peculiar to the context. In attempting to recreate memories of events and stories, I found that the use of contemporary materials did not have the breadth of impact that I was trying to develop in the work. The images are very much a part of the beings and experiences that were my grandfathers. In my attempt to explore my grandfathers' lives and their effect on me I had to find images that contained an aesthetic that would represent the past both physically and spiritually. I feel that in a sense I am a continuation of one experience. The moments that defined their lives and personalities are part of the chain of events that have helped form me as an artist.

The individual prints are either a representation of stories from my past, vignettes of memories or an evocation of an emotional state that I have experienced in the last year while developing this body of work. I started building these images on a purely intuitive level and as they progressed I directed each individual image to function as metaphor for my experience. I was conscious

of not being overly personal and exclusive in my handling of the images as it is important that a viewer can infer some of my subjective intent as well as find a personal connection between the work and their life experiences.

The casting molds that are present create a real time entrance for the viewer into the aesthetic presentation of the work that I have created. The castings are also a way for me as the artist to aid in the suspension of the viewer's own reality (the now) and create a semblance of a place and frame of reference (the past) when experiencing the show.

Each work is a reference to an emotional state, a specific experience from my past or story told to me. The print *Papa's Home* is a work about my father's father, his return from the war, and the beginning of the era in which I grew up. This work is about the person who I feel that my grandfather was, and is an exploration of my perceptions. In order to write about this piece I need to talk about it on more than one level. The choices that I made in the composition not only represent a story or past but also the perception of a past as well as the present. I started with the photo images of my grandfather wearing a sailor's uniform and a cotton mill—the person and his career. Through these images a timeline is established for the viewer as well as a whole world of associations. The photo of my grandfather intends to show a kind man, yet it is printed in a halftone in an attempt to separate the physical person from my idea of him. We are unable to understand the loss of a person. The image is that of my grandfather but only a semblance of him to which I emotionally respond, and yet it is simply a collection of negative and positive spaces. The figure of my grandfather is in the foreground and is the dominant form in the composition; this is a part of my perception of the

person, strong and sure. He is the father figure that I knew standing in front of the textile mill and gear composition. The figure in front of this is a representation of the past or the history of an experience. The mill photo seems like a walkway, and the figure is that of a guide or guard. The soft decay or tarnish-like marks reinforce the idea of the passage of time and relate the print to a sentimental object that may tarnish from lack of use, representing the loss of a person. The absence of any other figures or implied narrative in the print leads the viewer to interpret the imagery and its content via their own experience and associations.

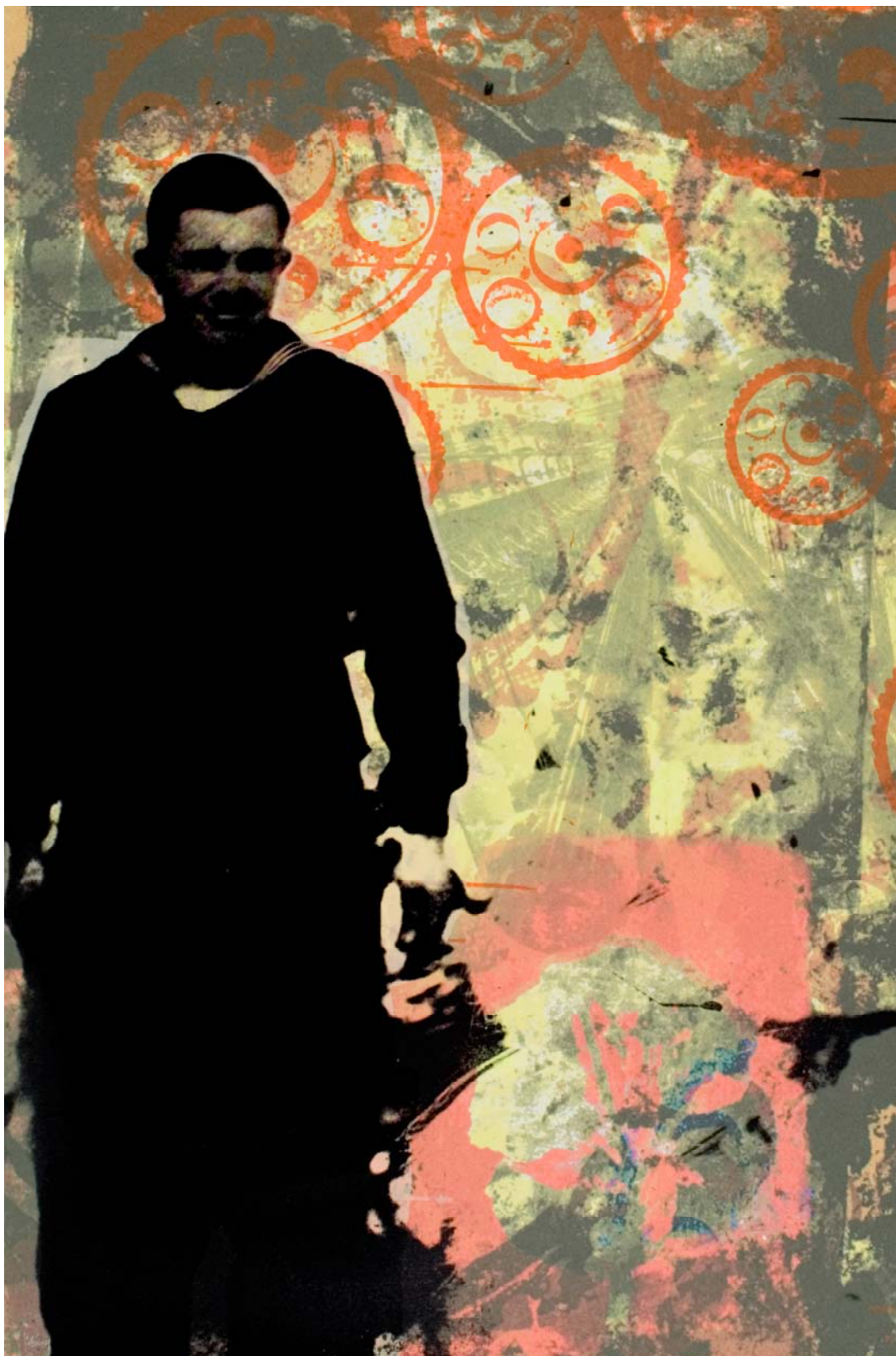
In *Les and Lester: Beginning of a Time as in Papa's Home*, I have taken photo likenesses and broken them down into halftone patterns, distancing them from a photographic reality to a type of mark or image that functions with the rest of the composition in a formal manner. The photo I have dealt with is that of my mother's father and his twin brother circa 1940–1945. In the foreground is the flattened image of two cotton baskets that fall directly in line with the image of my grandfather and his brother tying them together and associating the figures with the basket image. The basket is a stand-in for personal experience and associative history. The basket image also references the print as a container or depository for my thoughts and emotions. The print remains a record of the transient nature of my perception of life and the world in which I live.

The body of work I have produced is a physical representation of the experiences I had growing up and the relationships that I had with my grandfathers. I am reaching out to recreate moments in time and recording my feelings. In doing so, I was able to capture the pieces of my grandfathers' personalities and experiences I can see in myself. I know they helped me become the man I am, and

without their nurturing and guidance I would have been unable to produce this body of work. In remembering my grandfathers I feel that the universalities of human experience have become evident and that the work is not only a reflection of my personal life and feelings but speaks to us all on an elemental level.



1. *Les and Lester: Beginnings of a Time* (24" x 36")



2. *Papa's Home* (24" x 36")



3. *Kitten* (24" x 36")



4. *I've Got an Old Car Too Papa* (24" x 36")



5. *Contained Moments: Portraits From the Past* (24" x 36")



6. *Basket Composition 1* (24" x 36")



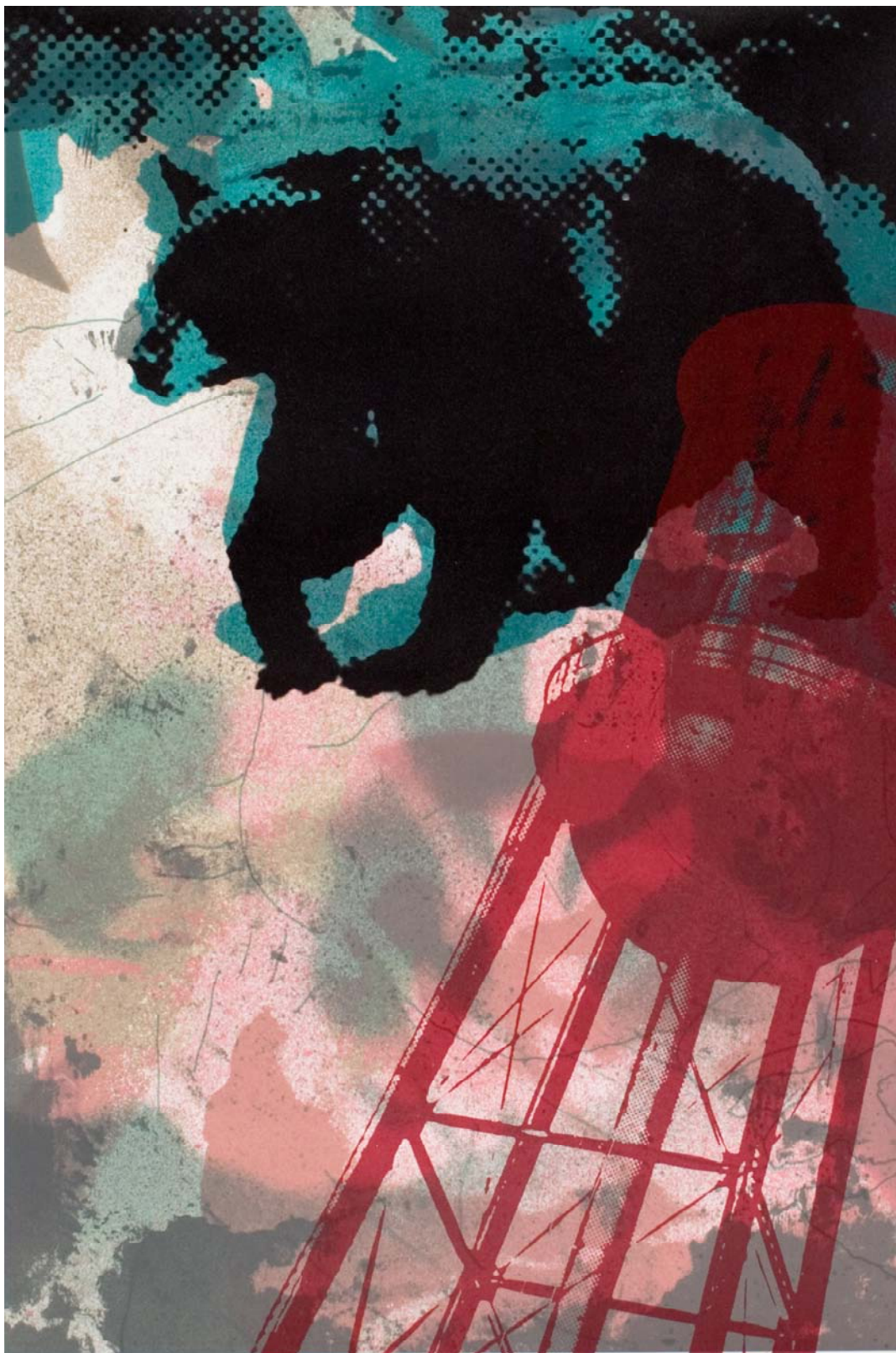
7. *Tell me About the Fox and the Bear Again* (24" x 36")



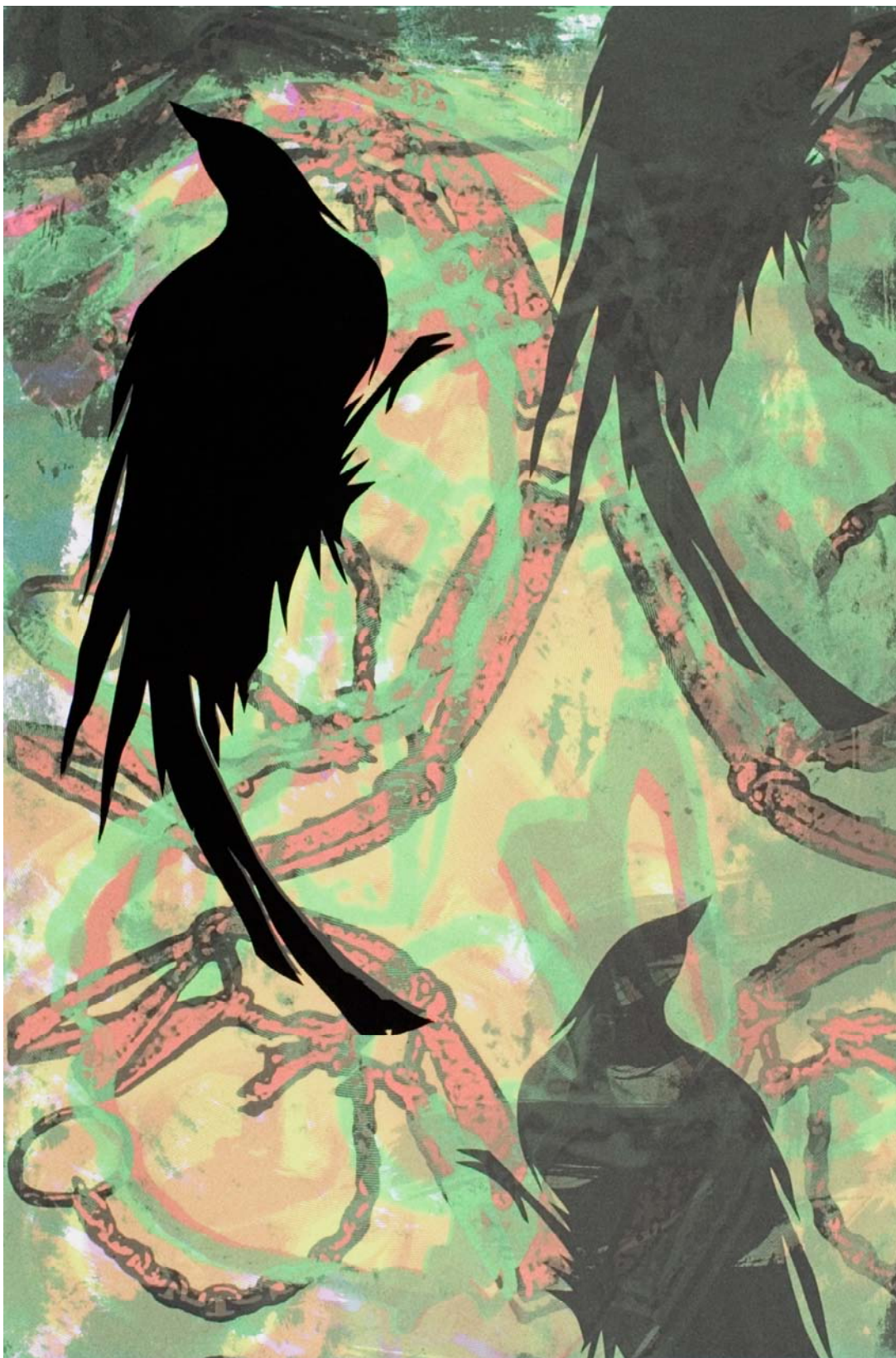
8. *B.O.C.C. Master Patt. Open Spool* (24" x 36")



9. *Fox and the Shuttle* (24" x 36")



10. *Fair to Midland: W.B.* (24" x 36")



11. *Remus Composition 7: The Bear Trap* (24" x 36")



12. *Radio Story* (24" x 36")



13. *Rabbit Hunting* (24" x 36")



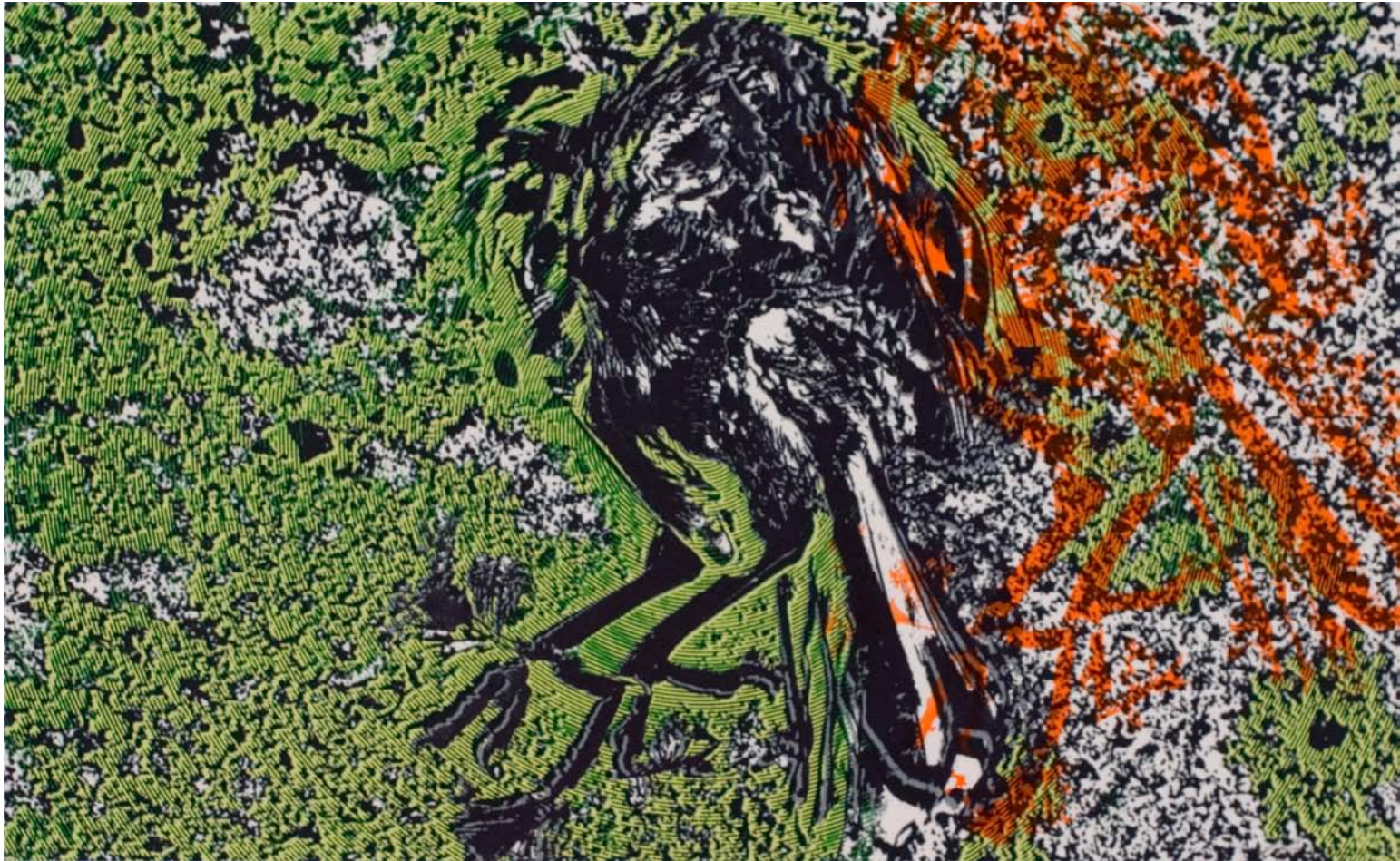
14. *Thoughts of Home* (24" x 36")



15. *U.S.S. Augusta* (24" x 36")



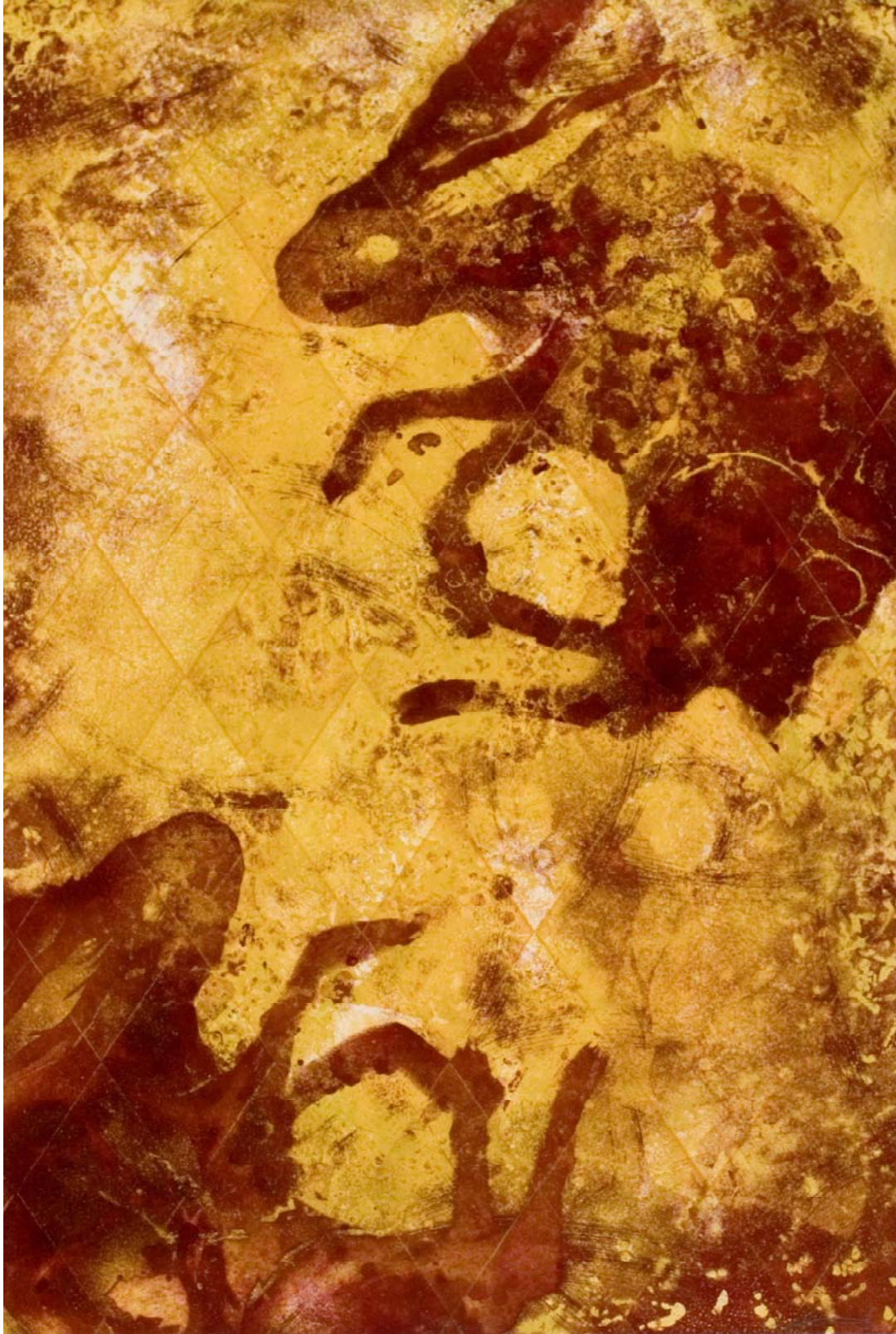
16. *Lace Composition 2* (24" x 36")



17. *Mortality of a Calling* (24" x 36")



18. *Vanitas* (17'' x 38'')



19. *Aesop's Composition 4* (24" x 36")



20. *Who's Going to Tell the Stories Now?* (24" x 36")

VITA

Donald Lawrence Simmons was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1979. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, in May 2003 under the instruction of Quentin Moseley. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University in August of 2006.